

LOOMIS
NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION AREA

MANAGEMENT PLAN

Okanogan County

Washington

April, 2003

Washington Department of Natural Resources

Natural Areas Program

PREFACE

This management plan fulfills requirements outlined in two legal documents (settlement agreement and memorandum of clarification) and the Natural Resources Conservation Areas (NRCA) Act, Chapter 79.71 RCW. It provides guidance for site-specific management of the Loomis NRCA.

Two parcels, now known as the north and south blocks of the Loomis NRCA, were transferred out of school trust status in January 2000 to fulfill part of the April 1998 Settlement Agreement between Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, Friends of Loomis Forest, The Mountaineers, Kettle Range Conservation Group, Washington Environmental Council and Gerald Henderson, and the Washington Board of Natural Resources.

A First Memorandum of Clarification (December 1998) followed the Settlement Agreement and specified that the parcels would remain in state ownership and be managed as a “conservation management area” under the Natural Resources Conservation Areas Act (RCW 79.71). Furthermore, the Memorandum of Clarification states that “a management plan for the Loomis NRCA will be developed under Chapter 79.71 RCW to coordinate conservation of the property’s natural ecological values with traditional agricultural management (cattle grazing) and recreation activities.”

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Department of Natural Resources

The Loomis Natural Resources Conservation Area (NRCA) is one type of land designation managed by the Department of Natural Resources. The Department, led by the Commissioner of Public Lands, manages more than 3 million acres of state-owned trust forest, agricultural, range lands and commercial properties. These lands earn income to build schools, universities and other state institutions, and help fund local services in many counties. In addition to earning income, trust lands protect public resources such as water and habitat for native plant and wildlife species, and provide opportunities for public recreation and outdoor environmental education statewide.

Washington Natural Areas [Natural Resource Conservation Areas (NRCA) and Natural Area Preserves (NAP)] are managed for conservation purposes. They protect unique and threatened native ecosystems, and offer educational and research opportunities. NRCAs also provide opportunities for low-impact public use. Natural Areas make up less than 2% of the land managed by DNR.

Natural Areas Program

Within DNR, the Natural Areas Program manages NAPs and NRCAs. Staff in region offices and at headquarters in Olympia work to maintain the features for which the natural areas were established and keep the sites in the best ecological condition possible. The Natural Areas Program manages 27 NRCAs (including the Loomis NRCA) and 47 NAPs throughout the state. Special features found in NAPs and NRCAs include: coastal rainforests, grasslands, salt marshes, Ponderosa pine forests, bogs, sagebrush communities, scenic vistas of the Columbia River, active nesting sites for bald eagle and peregrine falcons, and habitat for the basalt daisy, the Puget blue butterfly, Oregon spotted frog, Canada lynx and grizzly bear.

B. Site Location/Loomis State Forest

The Loomis NRCA is part of the Loomis State Forest located west of Tonasket in Okanogan County, Washington (Loomis NRCA & Vicinity Map, Figure 1). The Loomis Forest includes three land designations: trust land, Natural Area Preserve and Natural Resources Conservation Area. While the Loomis NRCA has a specific designation that differentiates it from the Chopaka NAP and the Loomis State Forest, DNR is responsible for all three areas as a whole. Endangered species habitat, late successional forest, public use and resource protection may be analyzed or coordinated across the Loomis Forest as a whole while site-specific management activities follow the goals and objectives outlined in the associated management plan.

The Loomis NRCA consists of two parcels; the north block is located in Township 40 North, Range 24 East, W.M. and the south block is located in Townships 37 & 38 North, Ranges 23 & 24 East, W.M. (see Appendix A for a complete legal description). The two Loomis NRCA parcels are surrounded by public land: national forest, Bureau of Land Management, state forest, state natural area preserve and a protected area in Canada.

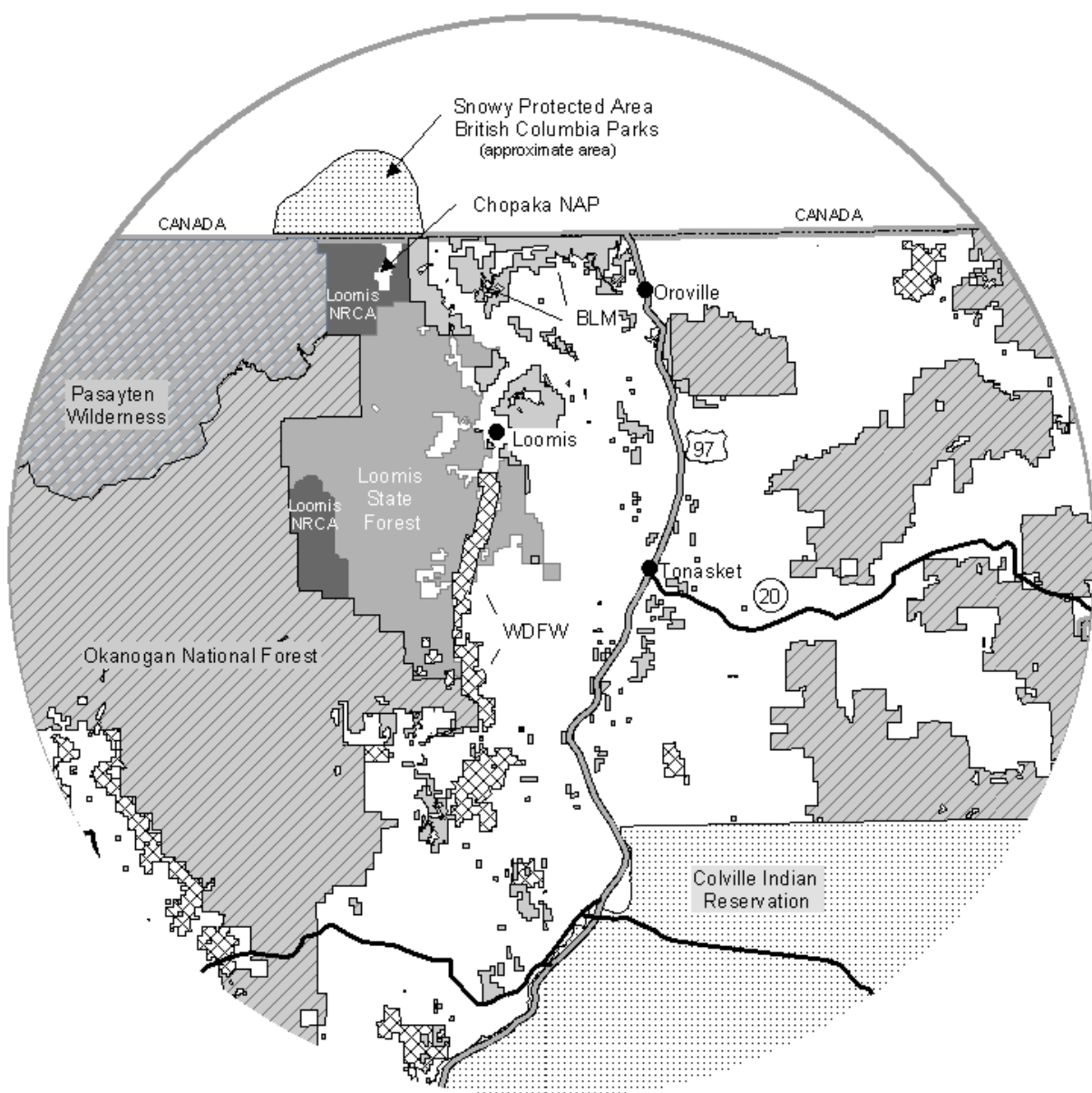
C.General Site Description

The Loomis NRCA is one of the largest NRCAs in the state. It covers approximately 24,700 acres (14,000 acres in the north block, 10,700 in the south block). The Loomis NRCA includes mountains draped with vast forests of lodgepole pine and valleys with wet meadow and streams. Other types of vegetation include Engelmann spruce, quaking aspen, Douglas fir and, mid-elevation and alpine meadows. Fire rejuvenates the lodgepole forests and is most frequent in the dry summer months. Most of the precipitation occurs in the winter months as snow. Past natural fire events created thousands of acres of even-aged lodgepole forests including the forests within the NRCA. As a result, acres of trees aged at the same time and became host trees to native bark beetles. The natural accumulation of woody material combined with hot, dry, windy weather create conditions for another fire cycle. Heat from the high intensity fire release seeds for the next generation of lodgepole pine. Current law mandates the suppression of all uncontrolled fires thus, interruption of the fire cycle may occur as a result of fire suppression.

Species of special concern include twelve plant species and nine wildlife species (grizzly bear, Canada lynx, gray wolf, wolverine, northern goshawk and four butterfly species) ranked as critically imperiled, vulnerable to extinction or rare in Washington State. Habitat for these species exists within the NRCA. Areas of specific sensitivity include meadows, wetlands, riparian areas, aspen forests, talus subalpine cirque basins and subalpine/alpine meadows.

The Loomis Forest area was first known by Native American tribes now represented by the Colville Confederated Tribes and the Lower Similkameen Indian Band. During and after European settlement the area that is now the Loomis NRCA was used by trappers and, sheep and cattle herders. Present day uses include cattle grazing, hunting, recreational equestrian use, hiking, snowmobiling, snow-shoeing and cross-country skiing.

Figure 1. Loomis NRCA and Vicinity



Okanogan County



BLM - Bureau of Land Management
WDFW - Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

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D.Management Policy and Legal Requirements

The land transfer of the Loomis NRCA was directed by the April 1998 Settlement Agreement between the Board of Natural Resources and the Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, et al. and the First Memorandum of Clarification dated December 16, 1998. The Settlement Agreement specified the two parcels to be transferred out of Common School Trust and the Memorandum of Clarification specified that the parcels would be managed by the state under the Natural Resources Conservation Areas Act.

First Memorandum of Clarification

The following clarifications, related to land management, were made to the initial Settlement Agreement dated April 7th, 1998.

- The specific boundaries of land transferred from trust status to NRCA will not be subject to expansion nor extend beyond or outside of the boundaries established at the time of the land transfer.
- The ecological significance of the transferred parcels will be protected and the parcels will be managed to prohibit commercial logging and non-emergency road building and, to allow low-impact public use and agricultural activities to continue.
- Following the land transfer, a management plan for the two parcels will be developed under RCW 79.71 (NRCA Act) to coordinate conservation of the natural ecological values with traditional agricultural management and recreational activities. Broad based public participation will be solicited in the development of the management plan.
- The primary purpose for the land transfer was to maintain the land in the most natural condition possible to provide habitat for native wildlife, including wildlife requiring roadless areas, and wilderness recreational opportunities.
- Grazing activities on the transferred parcels permitted by valid grazing leases and permits (five permit ranges overlap with the NRCA) encompassing the parcels, including renewals and extensions will be unaffected by the land transfer and will be allowed to continue, provided, however, that such grazing activities remain in compliance with the “Ecosystem Standards for State-Owned Agricultural and Grazing Lands”(HB 1309), are in compliance with the specific Coordinated Resource Management plan (CRMP) developed for each permit range located within the NRCA, are in good standing with the leasing and permit requirements, and are in full compliance with the Settlement Agreement.
- Existing, traditional and appropriate low-impact recreation uses, including snowmobile, and equine activities, will continue on the parcels. The management plan will identify existing snowmobile, equine, and hiking trails for continued public use.

Natural Resources Conservation Areas (NRCA) Act

In the late 1980s, the Washington State Legislature found an increasing and continuing need by the people of Washington for certain areas of the state to be conserved, in rural as well as urban settings, for the benefit of present and future generations. Consequently, the

Washington State NRCA Act, Chapter 79.71 of the Revised Code of Washington (RCW), was enacted in 1987. To be considered for NRCA designation, land and/or water should have important ecological, geological, cultural or scenic characteristics and opportunities for low-impact public use and outdoor environmental education.

The Statewide Management Plan for NRCAs provides guidance for the management of and plan development for NRCAs. The primary purpose of NRCAs is to protect ecological systems, habitat, and scenic landscapes, thus natural resource-oriented purposes have priority over public-oriented purposes such as: low-impact recreation and environmental education (hiking, nature study, photography, picnicking, interpretive tours, scientific research etc.).

The Loomis NRCA is managed under the NRCA Act, however it is unique in that snowmobiling, equestrian activities and cattle grazing are permitted uses and will continue on the site. These uses are permitted in order to meet requirements developed specifically for the Loomis NRCA and “in no event shall these uses on the Property (the NRCA) be deemed a precedent for allowing similar uses in other NRCAs (First Memorandum of Clarification 1998).” To the extent possible, while maintaining traditional public use, natural resource-oriented purposes will be given priority over the public-oriented purposes.

NRCA management goals include:

- Maintain, enhance or restore ecological systems, including but not limited to aquatic, coastal, montane, and geological systems, whether such systems are unique or typical to Washington state;
- Maintain exceptional scenic landscapes;
- Maintain habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species; and
- Provide opportunities for low-impact public use, scientific research and outdoor environmental education.

E. Purpose of this Plan

The purpose of this plan is to coordinate conservation of the property’s natural ecological values with traditional uses. This plan is intended to guide management activities for both blocks of the Loomis NRCA. Several other plans play an important role in the management of the Loomis NRCA and rather than reiterate those plans, this plan should be used in conjunction with them. See the following section for a list and description of related plans.

DNR will implement the management recommendations as funding becomes available. Furthermore, budget requests for maintenance, monitoring and operations will be based on the objectives and actions of this plan.

F. Relationship to Other Plans

DNR Loomis State Forest Landscape Plan (1996)

The Loomis Forest Landscape Plan (DNR 1996) was developed to manage forest resources (timber, water, wildlife habitat etc.) for trust land. It will be updated so that it is consistent with this plan. The Landscape Plan is designed to ensure long term productivity of trust assets while addressing a range of environmental and public use resources to the extent that their protection is consistent with the department's trust obligations. Resources covered in the Landscape Plan include: air, archaeological and historical elements, fish, grazing land, mineral, recreation areas, soil, timber, water and wildlife.

Many of the resources addressed in the Loomis Landscape Plan are managed across the three land designations of the Loomis Forest. DNR is held accountable for all lands that it manages and cannot legally differentiate between land designations when considering regulatory actions, cumulative impacts, and habitat needs for listed species. As a result, habitat analysis and delineation, such as mapping lynx habitat and late successional forest, may be performed across the Loomis Forest as a whole, while management activities follow management plans associated with individual land designations.

DNR Resource Management Plans for Permit Ranges (2002)

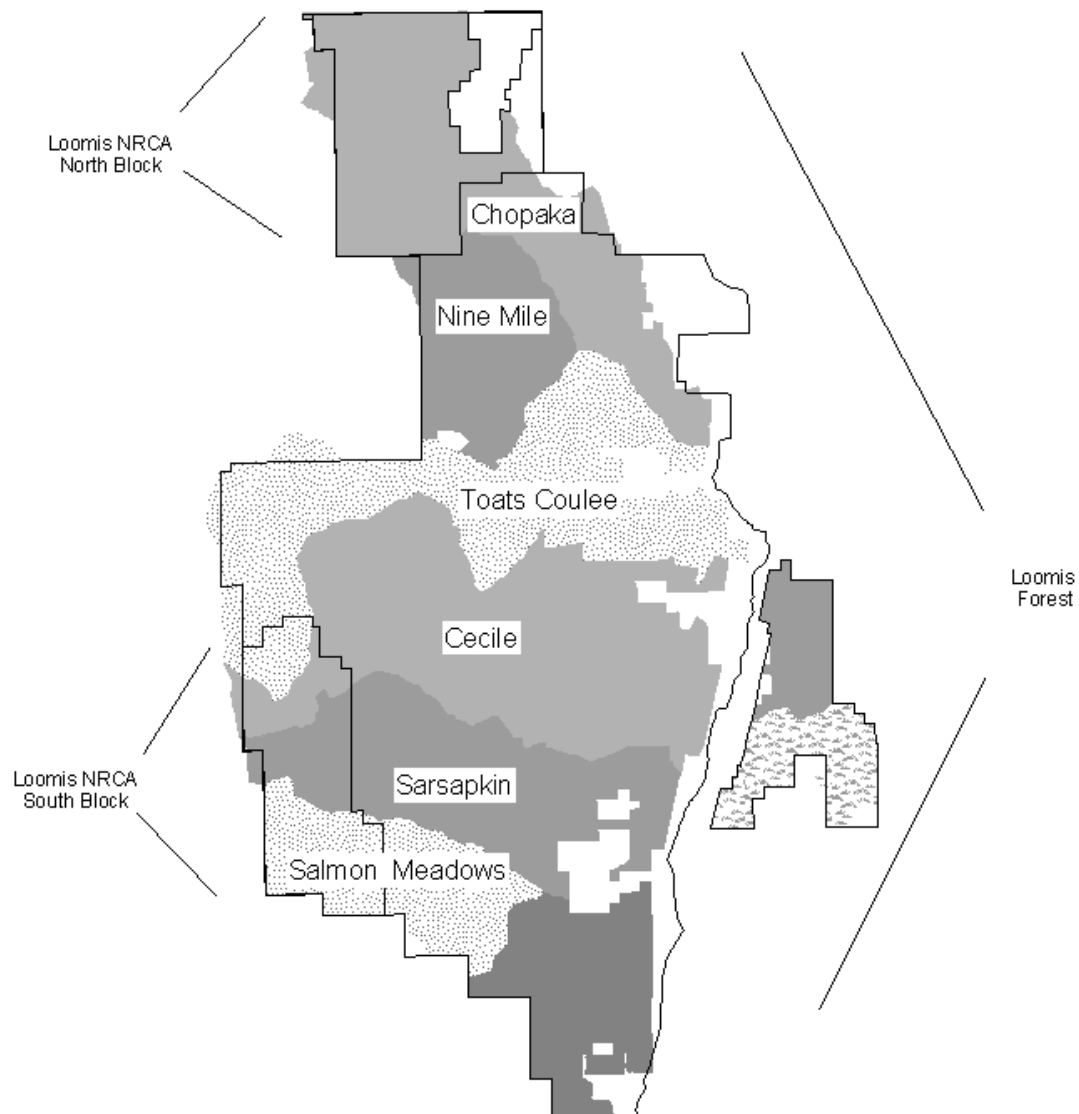
Five permit ranges (Chopaka, Toats Coulee, Cecile, Sarsapkin and, Salmon Meadows) overlap with the NRCA (Figure 2. Permit Ranges). Each permit range has a Resource Management Plan that describes the management objectives and practices used to implement livestock grazing.

In 1993 the legislature passed HB1309 which directed the Department of Fish and Wildlife to develop goals for the wildlife and fish that the agency manages, to preserve, protect, and perpetuate wildlife and fish on shrub steppe habitat, or grazeable woodlands (excerpt from HB1309). A technical committee under the guidance of the Washington State Conservation Committee was charged with developing standards (HB 1309 Ecosystem Standards for State-owned Agricultural and Grazing Land) to achieve the goals developed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife. Both Washington Departments of Fish and Wildlife, and Natural Resources are required to implement practices to meet the Ecosystem Standards. Twenty-five Ecosystem Standards were developed and each one describes a desired ecological condition and includes a strategy, a rationale/discussion section and possible management practices.

As land managers, DNR staff work with permit holders to incorporate best management practices into the Resource Management Plans for Permit Ranges to meet the HB1309 Ecosystem Standards. The Resource Management Plans cover the whole permit range regardless of land designation, thus this plan (Loomis NRCA Plan) does not include specific range management practices. Instead, Natural Areas staff participate in the development of the Resource Management Plans.

Range permits are renewed through a collaborative process between the permit holder, DNR trust land managers and Natural Areas Program staff, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. As a result, the Resource Management Plans will serve as the primary management document for grazing activity in the Loomis NRCA.

Figure 2. Permit Ranges



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DNR Modified Lynx Habitat Management Plan (June 2002)

Canada lynx was listed as threatened in the state of Washington in October 1993 by the Washington State Wildlife Commission. In April 2000 Canada lynx was listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). DNR manages land in each of the six Lynx Management Zones defined by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Okanogan Lynx Management Zone is the largest zone. Three Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs) overlap with the Loomis Forest and the Loomis NRCA (Figure 3, Lynx Analysis Units).

DNR developed the Lynx Habitat Management Plan in 1996, in collaboration with WA Department of Fish and Wildlife, to respond to the state listing of the species. In May 2002 DNR modified the Lynx Habitat Management Plan to incorporate additional mitigation measures agreed to by the USFWS (Martin, April 26, 2002). These measures are intended to help ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

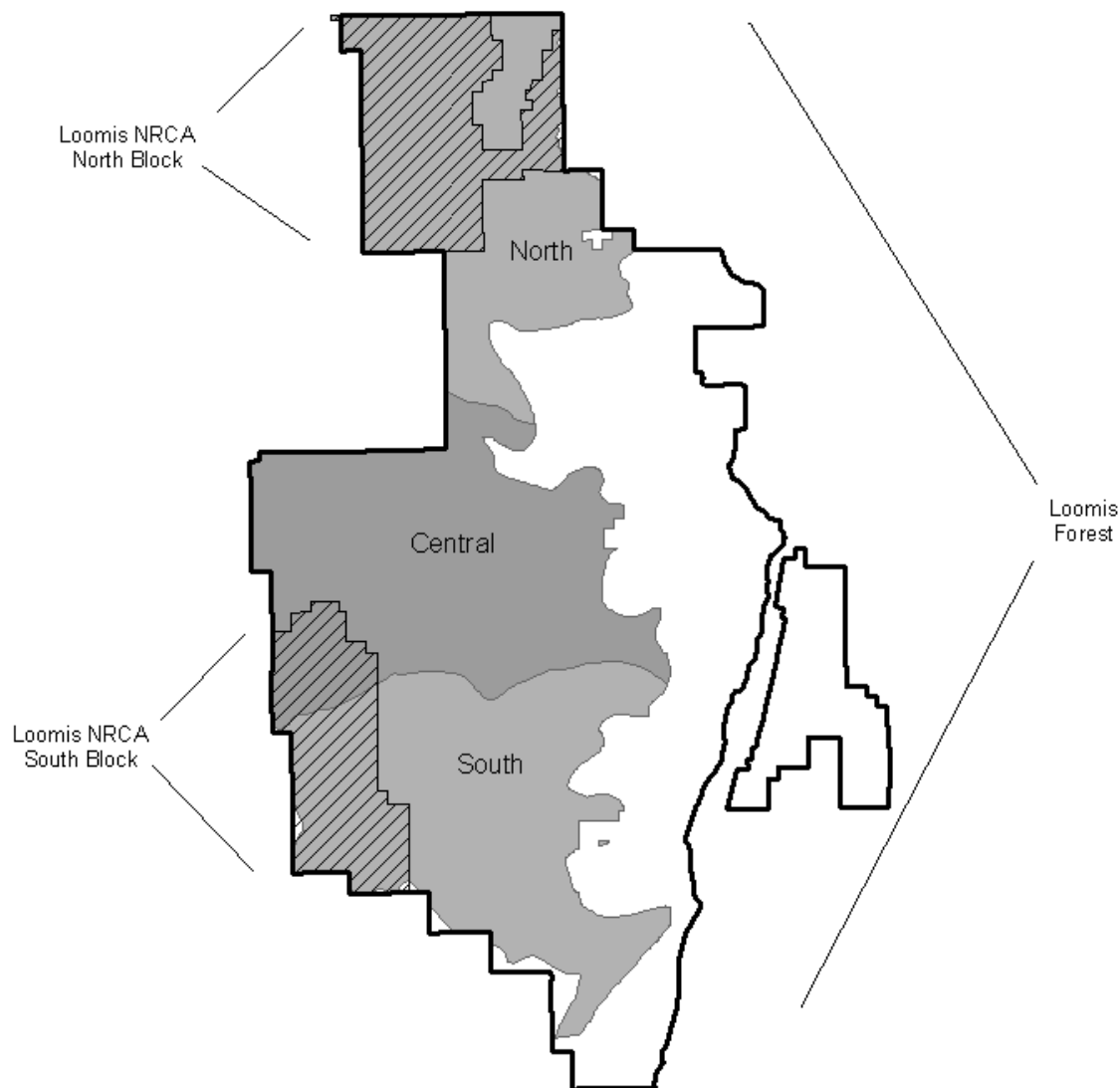
The original Lynx Plan outlines DNR's commitment to incorporate lynx habitat associations into its timber management plans and was written prior to the designation of the Loomis NRCA. The newly designated Loomis NRCA will continue to play a role in the implementation of the Modified Lynx Habitat Management Plan. The Modified Lynx Habitat Management Plan, along with any subsequent changes to the Plan that are needed to incorporate new research for protection of the lynx, will remain the primary management document to guide lynx habitat management within the NRCA.

Federal Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (1993)

The grizzly bear is listed by the federal government as threatened in the state of Washington (US Fish and Wildlife Service 1993) and by the state as endangered (WA Department of Fish and Wildlife 2002). The Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan written by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1993 guides grizzly bear recovery. The recovery plan delineates six Recovery Ecosystems, of which the North Cascades Grizzly Bear Ecosystem is the second largest and includes the Loomis NRCA. A supplemental chapter was developed to specifically address grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades and was added to the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan in 1997.

Washington's portion of the North Cascades Grizzly Bear Ecosystem is subdivided into 54 Bear Management Units (BMUs) and the Loomis NRCA is located in the Upper Toats BMU. Thus, the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan will guide the management of grizzly bear habitat within the Loomis NRCA (US Fish and Wildlife Service 1993).

Figure 3. Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs)



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G. Adjacent Land

The Loomis NRCA is surrounded by forested public land (Loomis NRCA and Vicinity Map, Figure 1). Management of the adjacent land is described below.

Common School Trust Land, DNR

The largest land designation within the Loomis State Forest is managed to produce revenue for the Common School Trust. Timber is harvested according to the Loomis State Forest Landscape Plan (1996). The plan describes a transition from current conditions to desired future conditions and includes objectives for producing revenue from timber harvest.

General objectives include:

- To generate long-term income for the trust beneficiaries, given the legal, biological, and social constraints within which the forest must be managed.
- To create and maintain healthy, productive forest resources.
- To provide habitat that is capable of supporting healthy populations of native fish and wildlife.
- To provide recreational and other public benefits, consistent with trust obligations.

Chopaka Natural Area Preserve, DNR

The Chopaka NAP is nearly surrounded by the north block of the Loomis NRCA. The guiding principle for managing the Chopaka Natural Area Preserve (NAP) is to permit ecological and physical processes to predominate, while controlling activities that directly or indirectly modify them. The overall vision for the NAP is to protect natural diversity and maintain the site in the best condition possible for research and education. As a result access is limited to uses related to research and education.

DNR Chopaka NAP Management Plan (2002)

The NAP differs from the Loomis NRCA in that it offers a higher level of protection and is managed specifically for scientific research and education. Information regarding the NAP should be included on NRCA information signs to alert visitors of the sensitivity of the NAP. Additionally, the Chopaka Management Plan identified a specific need to enhance the visibility of the NAP boundary along the Disappointment Creek Trail (formerly known as the Jeep Trail) especially in winter months.

Snowy Protected Area, Canada Ministry of Forests

The northern boundary of the Loomis NRCA is adjacent to the Snowy Mountain Protected Area in Canada. Protected Areas are very similar to Washington State NRCAs in land management emphasis, in that they are managed to allow the site to exist in the most natural condition possible while providing opportunities for low-impact recreation and outdoor environmental education. The majority of public use occurs in the northern part of the protected area and is oriented away from the NRCA.

The Snowy Protected Area protects a wide range of vegetation and wildlife from dry grassland valleys to extensive alpine meadows and supports a provincially significant herd of California bighorn sheep (B.C. Parks).

Okanogan National Forest, US Department of Agriculture Forest Service

The Okanogan National Forest covers approximately 1,706,000 acres and includes two Wilderness Areas: The Pasayten and the Lake Chelan-Sawtooth. The area is famous for its mule deer herds and sports fisheries. It has numerous small campgrounds and approximately 1,600 miles of trails making it a popular place for cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding (USDA Forest Service).

The Pasayten Wilderness is adjacent to the western boundary of the north block and is closed to motorized and mechanized use. A valid federal grazing permit overlaps with the Wilderness Area and also is adjacent to the Chopaka Permit Range in the north block of the NRCA. Horseback riding is permitted in the Pasayten Wilderness Area and it is common for equestrians to ride between the Wilderness Area and the NRCA. Snowmobiles however, are not permitted in the Wilderness Area. Fire is recognized as an important element in maintaining the natural ecosystem in the Wilderness Area and the Pasayten Wilderness Area Fire Plan focuses on managing natural fire rather than immediate suppression. DNR is required to suppress uncontrolled fires thus DNR staff will continue to work with the Forest Service to coordinate fire suppression response and tactics.

USFS lands adjacent to the south block have a specific set of guidelines for winter motorized vehicle use. DNR will continue to coordinate with USFS to manage winter use across administrative boundaries.

Chopaka Mountain Wilderness Study Area, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Approximately 3½ miles of the east boundary of the north block is adjacent to land managed by BLM. The remote area, known as the Chopaka Mountain Wilderness Study Area consists of cliffs and talus sloping away from the Loomis NRCA and based on its wilderness characteristics, was reviewed in 1982 to determine if it is a suitable site for preservation as wilderness. To date, Congress has not acted on public lands reviewed for wilderness characteristics and in the meantime, the Secretary of the Interior must manage the Chopaka Mountain Wilderness Study Area in a manner that will not impair the area's suitability for preservation as wilderness (BLM 1982).

The Chopaka Mountain Wilderness Study (BLM 1982) identifies a preferred alternative based on the concept that the site is not suitable for wilderness designation. However, most of the site would be designated as an area of critical environmental concern¹ and managed to enhance mountain goat habitat. A Research Natural Area in the upper part of the Anderson Creek drainage would be designated to protect a representative whitebark pine-subalpine fir

¹ Areas of Critical Environmental Concern is defined by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act as an area within the public lands where special management attention is required to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources or other natural systems or processes, or to protect life and safety from natural hazards.)

forest and plants proposed for or listed as threatened or endangered in the state of Washington (see Appendix B for species list) (BLM 1982).

Livestock grazing would continue with adjustments made based on monitoring vegetative condition and trend. The area would also be open for hunting, camping, hiking and other recreation activities that would not result in unnecessary or undue degradation of the environment. Timber may be harvested on 385 acres (7% of the site) located in the central part of the site along the east boundary.

H.Management Planning Process

Work on the planning process for the Loomis NRCA began in the spring of 2001. The public process began in September 2001 with an open house in Tonasket. The NRCA planning process was one of five planning projects introduced at the open house. A coordinated planning process was designed to serve all five of the planning projects. Six public workshops (held approximately every 3-4 months) were included in the Loomis NRCA public outreach process and at each workshop the public had an opportunity to receive information about and make comments on the Loomis NRCA.

In addition to the public workshops, DNR staff were available to meet with individuals and special interest groups individually. Most of these meetings occurred during the fall of 2001 through early Fall of 2002. DNR staff met with representatives of groups (including site visits), public meetings, phone calls and attended group meetings. Meetings were held with the following groups, organizations and agencies:

- Backcountry Horsemen, Okanogan Chapter
- British Columbia Parks
- Butte Buster Snowmobile Club
- Cattlemen Association
- Colville Confederated Tribes
- Friends of the Loomis Forest
- Kettle Range Conservation Group
- Loomis Forest Action Committee
- Natural Resource Conservation Service
- Northwest Ecosystem Alliance
- Okanogan County Citizens Coalition
- Okanogan County Commissioners
- Okanogan County Snowmobile Advisory Board
- Okanogan Resource Council
- Okanogan Public Utility District
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
- White Stone Irrigation District
- US Forest Service
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Yakama Indian Nation

The following is a general chronology of the establishment of the Loomis NRCA and the plan development process.

1998	Settlement Agreement identified two parcels for potential transfer from trust status. A First Memorandum of Clarification was signed at the end of the year and provided specific requirements concerning the designation and management of the parcels.
January 2000	Two parcels were transferred from trust status and designated as a conservation area. They are now called the Loomis NRCA.
April 2001 – August 2001	Internal pre-planning work.
Sept. 2001 – June 2002	Information gathering and preliminary development of the Loomis NRCA Fire Suppression Plan. Held four public workshops and several meetings with individual groups.
July 2002 – Nov. 2002	Development of the Loomis NRCA Management Plan. In November, the draft plan was made available for four weeks for public review and comment. Held the fifth public workshop and met with individual groups.
Dec. 2002 – Jan. 2002	Incorporated comments from the public and prepared the draft plan for the formal SEPA environmental review.
Jan. 22 – Feb 28, 2003	Formal comment period and public review of the draft plan. Held the sixth public workshop and solicited comments on the draft plan.
March 2003 – present	Reviewed public comments, documented responses and submitted a final plan to the SEPA Responsible Official for a final determination.

II. MANAGEMENT GOALS

The following management goals were developed using the First Memorandum of Clarification, the NRCA Act, and comments gathered during the scoping period.

- **Coordinate conservation of natural ecological values with outdoor environmental education, low-impact public use, snowmobile use, equestrian activities and livestock grazing.**
- **Maintain the parcels in the most natural condition possible.**
- **Protect examples of native ecosystems, habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive plants and wildlife, geologic features and scenic areas, and cultural resources.**
- **Comply with, the “Ecosystem Standards for State Owned Agricultural and Grazing Lands” and, the resource management plans developed for permit ranges located in the Loomis NRCA.**